

Calendar of Customs and Festivals.

December 22.

ST. DECLAN.—The festival of St. Declan at Ardmore was at one time one of the most frequented and at the same time one of the most conspicuously pagan of the popular religious observances in Ireland. The holy stone of St. Declan in Ardmore Bay stood on a number of irregular stones like pillars, and could only be reached at low tide. The worshippers, who numbered thousands, passed under it three times, crawling on bare knees. Each time they emerged they struck their backs three times against the rock while they repeated Aves. They also circuited the round tower and the house in the graveyard in which the saint was buried, and kissed the stone cross.

December 24.

CHRISTMAS EVE.—Carol Singing.—The custom of carol singing is one of considerable antiquity in the Church, sometimes in early days the office being performed by the bishop. Judging from some of the children's songs which have survived, a song of greeting or chant in addition to the cry of 'Yule' may, in northern England or Scotland, have formed part of the midwinter ritual, and there is a tradition that the Druids sang some form of chant at the cutting of the mistletoe. The boar's head was often introduced in the dining hall to the singing of a carol. In Rome it was once the custom of the shepherds of the Campagna to come in to play their pipes before the shrines of the Madonna. In England the waits were often composed of the church band or choir, and their religious character emphasised by remaining in church until twelve o'clock before going on their rounds.

December 25.

CHRISTMAS DAY.—In the Julian Calendar the day of the winter solstice, and in the sun cult, *i.e.* *Dies Natalis invicti solis* or *solis novi*, when both in Egypt and in Syria feasts were held and a ritual observed in which the birth of the sun was hailed with the cry, "The virgin has brought forth! The light is waxing!" The identification of the god Mithra with the sun, and the spread of his worship throughout the Roman Empire, extended still further the recognition of this day as of supreme religious import. Outside the Mediterranean area the pagan festival of midwinter extended over a period of some days, as is shown by the extent to which the twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany are observed as a holiday and a time of portent; while judging from the variations in date in similar and analogous customs in different localities, it is probable that no very precise but only an approximate uniformity prevailed in the date of observance. Yet as Roman and Mithraic influence extended, there would probably be a tendency to give an increasing importance to the exact day in relation to the midwinter festival. It is difficult, however, to discriminate between pre- and post-Christian influences, and the effect of the Mithraic cult among the general population may well have been exaggerated.

There can, however, be no doubt that in the lands in which Christianity first took root, Dec. 25 was a date of great importance in pagan rites, and largely influenced the ultimate choice of that date for the celebration of the Nativity of Our Lord, although the exact date of his birth was uncertain, being placed by some authorities in April and by others in November. The festival of Christmas was not observed in the early Church, and it was not until the fourth century that it became general, and even then with some differences. By the East it was celebrated on Jan. 6 at the feast of the Epiphany, and by the West

on Dec. 25. The latter date was made universal by Pope Liberius in the year 353-4. When once the feast had been established, increasing attention was paid to it, and its especially sacred character emphasised by Christian writers in order to distract attention from the pagan observances, which bore so close a resemblance to those of Christmas that both pagan and Christian accused each other of borrowing.

December 26.

ST. STEPHEN'S DAY.—In Germany "Der Grosse Pferdstag," a day associated with the cult of the horse, St. Stephen having been made the patron of horses. According to Hospinian, it was the custom on this day to gallop horses until they were in a sweat and then to bleed them to protect them from any disorders in the coming year. As a set practice this was said to have been introduced into Britain by the Danes. Among the Finns a piece of silver was thrown into the troughs out of which the horses drank on this day. Although it is pointed out in references to this custom that it was convenient at this season owing to the horses being at rest, a magical import is suggested by the belief that it will keep them from harm throughout the year. It may also be viewed in relation to the custom of 'Hodening' in the Isle of Thanet and at Ramsgate, where on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day a head of a dead horse was carried around on a pole by a carol-singing party. The bearer was concealed by the horse cloth, and a string was attached to the lower jaw to make the teeth snap. The hobby-horse was usually a conspicuous figure in the Christmas mumming performances.

Hence St. Stephen's Day was also associated with the chase, and was regarded as a day like Nov. 5 and St. Andrew's Day on which the game laws did not apply. A special 'Boxing Day' meet is still usual.

HUNTING THE WREN.—Although in most European countries the wren is greatly revered, and it is considered unlucky to kill it or disturb its nest, in Britain, Ireland, and France it was hunted and killed at Christmas time—on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and St. Stephen's Day. Its body was hung on a pole with wings outspread, and it was then carried from house to house. Sometimes those who made a gift of money received a feather for good luck. In the Isle of Man the body was buried solemnly in the churchyard at the end of the day. In the south of France the procession was headed by a 'king of the wren,' the first who had struck down a bird. The custom may be compared with those of primitive peoples in which a sacred animal is killed periodically and carried in procession, as, for example, the bear among the Gilyaks of Siberia.

December 28.

CHILDERMAS, HOLY INNOCENTS.—A day which is reputed unlucky for all purposes, whether marriage, paring one's nails, wearing a new suit, or beginning to do anything, the explanation being that it was the day on which the massacre of the Innocents by Herod took place. The ceremony of the boy bishop sometimes took place on this day as well as that of St. Nicholas, or his jurisdiction might last until this date. In order that the day might remain fresh in memory, children were whipped on this day—a method which may be compared with that of bumping a boy's head on a stone in beating the bounds. In France it was the privilege of the young people who rose early to turn over and smack the late risers as they lay in bed. In Wales on St. Stephen's Day any one was privileged to beat another on the legs, even until the blood ran. The custom may be compared with the practice of whipping boys in Spartan religious ritual.